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SANTA ROSA COUNTY PEANUT HARVEST, UNDERWAY

The harvest of 9,981 acres of peanuts in the northern portion of Santa Rosa County is in full swing. Peanuts are very important to Santa Rosa with an average of \$9.25 million contributed to the local economy.

The peanut, while grown in tropical and subtropical regions throughout the world, is native to the Western Hemisphere. It probably originated in South America and spread throughout the new World as Spanish explorers discovered the peanut's versatility. When the Spaniards returned to Europe, peanuts went with them. Later, traders were responsible for spreading peanuts to Asia and Africa. The peanut made its way back to North America during the slave trading period. Although there were some commercial peanut farms in the U.S. during the 1700's and 1800's, peanuts were not extensively grown. This lack of interest in peanut farming is attributed to the fact that the peanut was regarded as food for the poor and because growing and harvesting techniques were slow and difficult. Until the Civil War, the peanut remained a regional food associated with the southern United States.

After the Civil War, the demand for peanuts increased rapidly. By the end of the nineteenth century, the development of equipment for production, harvesting and shelling peanuts, as well as processing techniques, contributed to the expansion of the peanut industry. The new twentieth century labor-saving equipment resulted in a rapid demand for peanut oil, roasted and salted peanuts, peanut butter and confections.

Seven states account for approximately 98 percent of all peanuts grown in the U.S.: Georgia (37.7%) grows the major proportion of all peanuts followed by Texas (23.2%); Alabama (10.5%); North Carolina (9.3%); Florida (6.4%); Virginia (5.4%), and Oklahoma (5.2%). There are approximately 40,000 peanut farms in the major producing regions.

The U.S. Produces four basic varieties of peanuts: Runner, Virginia, Spanish and Valencia. Each type is distinctive in size and flavor.

Runners have become the dominant type due to the introduction in the early 1970's of a new runner variety, the Florunner, which was responsible for a spectacular increase in peanut yields. Florunner has now been replaced by newer varieties.

Runners have rapidly gained wide acceptance because of their attractive kernel size range; a high proportion of runners are used for peanut butter. Runners, grown mainly in Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Texas and Oklahoma, account for 73 percent of total U.S. production.

Virginias have the largest kernels and account for most of the peanuts roasted and eaten as in shells.

Spanish type peanuts have smaller kernels covered with a reddish-brown skin. They are used predominantly in peanut candy, although significant quantities are also used for salted nuts and peanut butter.

Americans are eating more peanuts overall; more peanut butter and more snack peanuts. Total peanut consumption has been on the upward trend since 1996. Snack peanuts are up by 13.3 percent over the past year and snack peanut consumption for 1999-2000 is projected at 392 million pounds.

Consumers throughout the world are concerned about consistently obtaining flavorful, wholesome peanuts which are uniform in size and free from foreign material and contamination. The U.S. peanut industry continues to invest heavily in plant modernization and the latest designs in automated cleaning and sorting equipment to ensure that all buyers receive the best possible product. U.S. government inspectors monitor processing at each stage of the peanut's journey from the farm to the manufacturer-and to the grocery shelf in the case of domestic production.

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